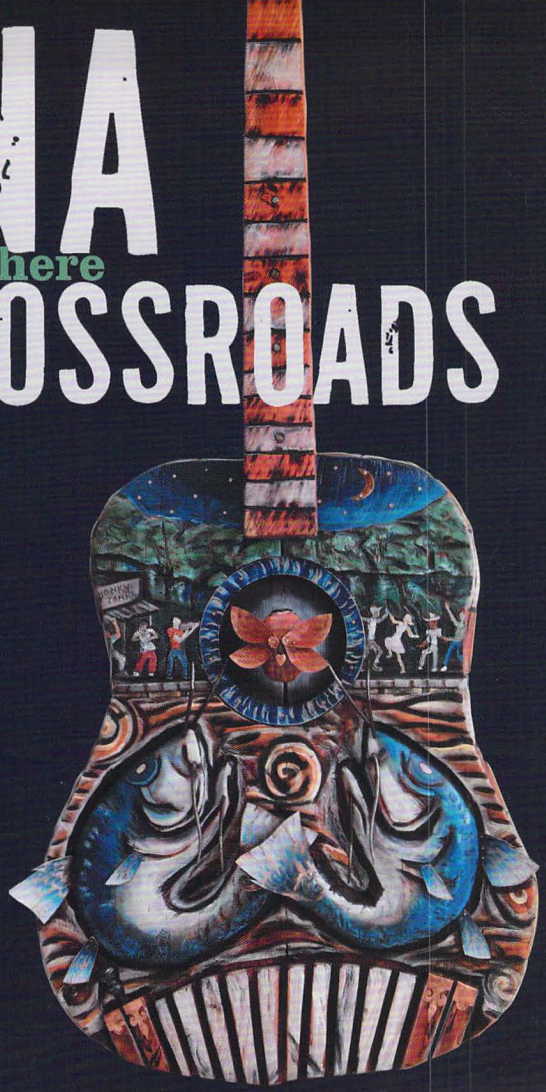
LOUISIANA CROSSROADS

A million ways to get there

MUSICAL JOURNEYS



AT THE CROSSROADS OF LAND AND WATER

BY JOHN LAUDUN

ON A MAP, LOUISIANA LOOKS LIKE A CAPITAL L. THE SOUTHWARD STROKE starts broad. It stretches from Shreveport through Monroe to Tallulah, narrowing as it sweeps past Alexandria. The eastward stroke seems almost equally wide as the one before it, but looks can deceive: our letter is not as solid as it appears. Nor is it as plain. Instead, it is elaborate, fringed with *chenières* and ancient levees reaching out into the Gulf of Mexico. None of this is obvious to the casual eye surveying a map. But to those of us who live here, or have traveled here, we know how tightly Louisiana Highway 1 hugs Bayou Lafourche as it makes its way to Grand Isle. Sometimes the shoulders are as narrow as a teenager's on his first date. The same is true of any number of roadways reaching as far down as they can from Cameron parish through Vermilion, St. Mary, Terrebonne, Lafourche, Jefferson and Plaquemines parishes to St. Bernard parish: highways and waterways wrestle each other for right of way, pride of path.

OPPOSITE PAGE: *"On the Bayou Teche, Louisiana," J.O. Davidson, Harper's Weekly, April 21, 1883*

SEEING LAND WHERE OTHERS SEE NONE IS A GIFT THE PEOPLE WHO MADE LOUISIANA BROUGHT WITH THEM. AMONG THE FIRST TO ARRIVE WITH SUCH A WAY OF SEEING WERE THE AFRICANS WHO ARRIVED IN CHAINS. MANY OF THEM CAME FROM A PART OF THE WORLD THAT HAD GROWN RICE FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS.

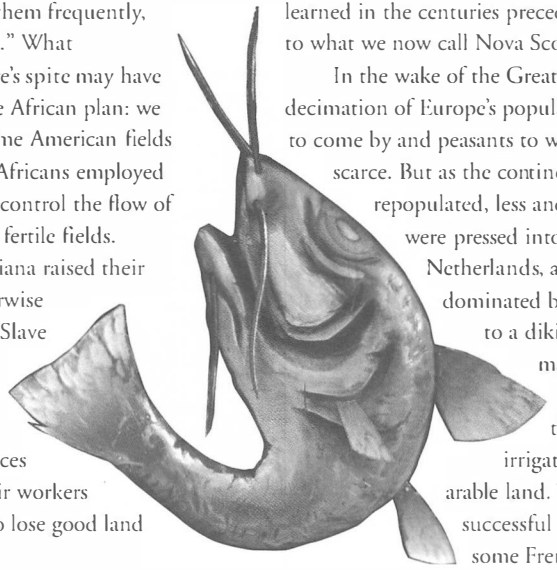
Such a landscape is foreign to many. In the wake of last year's hurricanes, there ranged a variety of debates around the nation about the wisdom of rebuilding in the areas struck by the storms. It makes no sense, many argued, to build a city, especially a modern American city, on land so, well, *not land*. The same argument was applied to other parts of the Gulf Coast. Too much risk. Too much water. Too little land.

Such an estimation of what it means to live along our coast is mistaken for two reasons: it mistakes wetlands of various kinds for *no lands* and it misunderstands the nature of creativity. Earth and water are, after all, two of the four primary elements of creation. Any good gardener can tell you that you need both for plants to grow. Potters and sculptors need both to work their clays and plasters. Painters need ground minerals and some form of damp to make paint. Wind instrument players lick their lips before they blow.

So much begins with earth and water. Seeing land where others see none is a gift the people who made Louisiana brought with them. Among the first to arrive with such a way of seeing were the Africans who arrived in chains. Many of them came from a part of the world that had grown rice for thousands of years. In 1446 one Portuguese chronicler described a group of explorers traveling along a West African river and coming across vast farms where "the country looked to them as having the aspect of a pond." One hundred fifty years later, another Portuguese, André Alvares

d'Almada, noted that West Africans "construct dikes of earth for fear of the tide, but despite them the river breaks them frequently, flooding the rice fields." What d'Almada saw as nature's spite may have in fact been part of the African plan: we know that by 1785 some American fields managed by enslaved Africans employed hollow cypress logs to control the flow of water from levees into fertile fields.

Africans in Louisiana raised their own rice on land otherwise understood as useless. Slave holders profited doubly: they didn't have to spend money or other resources to provide food to their workers and they didn't have to lose good land to such provisioning.



Following on the heels of the Africans was another group well used to seeing the productive possibilities of our confusing topography. The people who called themselves Acadians had already spent a century in the New World, turning saltwater tidal marshes into fields of cabbages and turnips. Their system of levees with *aboiteaux* that used a floating valve to keep salty sea water from coming in while letting flooding freshwater out was not something they invented on the spot. It was something their ancestors had learned in the centuries preceding their migration to what we now call Nova Scotia.

In the wake of the Great Plague's decimation of Europe's population, land was easy to come by and peasants to work the land were scarce. But as the continent recovered and repopulated, less and less fertile lands were pressed into service. In the Netherlands, a country largely dominated by its coast, this led to a diking of salt water marshes in order to convert them, through an elaborate irrigation system, into arable land. The Dutch were so successful in their efforts that some French landlords paid to have their tenants taught the process.

And so it was that an old Dutch technology came to be a current Cajun technology, as the existing natural levee systems built up by bayous and rivers continue to be extended and refined by today's farmers.

The Africans and the Acadians joined thousands of others in shaping the Louisiana landscape. All the settlers, however, were simply

Three trappers near Delacroix Island, St. Bernard Parish, circa 1941. (Farm Security Administration Photographs, Library of Congress/Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette)

joining an already alive and active landscape: New Orleans itself was situated at a portage point used by the area's Native Americans. The land, in other words, was simply a bridge between two great waterways: the natives carried their boats from the Mississippi River to *Bayouk Choupique*, today's Bayou St. John, which fed into Lake Pontchartrain.

The Native American boats were made from felled trees carved out with fire and stone tools. The new arrivals brought with them a better array of tools, and they immediately seized upon the pirogue's form as ideal for navigating the Louisiana landscape. It didn't take the colonists long to adopt the pirogue and transform its shape and weight with their more extensive tool sets of axes, adzes and augers.

The pirogue kept its dugout nature for two centuries until cheap planks became available during the timber industry boom of the late nineteenth century. (Curiously, there does not seem to have been a national debate about Louisiana's wetlands when they were a source of cheap lumber.)

Wood pirogues are still being made here in Louisiana, sometimes out of venerable cypress planks and sometimes out of plywood, but there are also pirogues made out of fiberglass and out of aluminum. Louisiana's makers long ago established their openness to new ideas and new materials – after all, only in Louisiana is a hand-me-down

Magnalite pot as prized as a cast iron one.

Given such creativity, it really was only a matter of time before something like the modern crawfish boat leapt into its magical existence. Part *bateau*, part paddle-wheel, part processing plant, the crawfish boat is both amazing to behold as an object and a thing of grace when operated by an experienced crawfisherman. The boat's engine drives a hydraulic pump that turns the great wheel, lifts the wheel boom, turns the boat left and right, and controls the craft's speed. Sitting behind a tray with sorting holes leading to mesh bags, the crawfisherman dances a waterborne cyborg ballet. Man and machine arc in and out along the line of crawfish traps, with each trap being pulled, dumped, sorted and rebaited just in time to replace the next trap which is in turn pulled, dumped, sorted and rebaited.

The dance travels along the line of traps until a section of field is completed. The boat then reveals its amphibian nature as the powerful propelling wheel pushes the craft up a field levee until the boat noses back down into the next section. When a field is complete, the craft pushes its way up onto land and motors down the road to the next field, rolling on the large back wheel and small wheels tucked under the front of the hull.

Watching a crawfish boat cruising down a two-lane highway, I feel a little sorry for people who can only utter the words "swamp" or "marsh" when they look upon our wetlands and see nothing there.

Our environment is our beginning. And our place makes us. Just ask old man catfish as he croaks out his sad song, wondering why no one comes to ask him to dinner as he sleeps in his hollow log at the bottom of the bayou. If the people who made this place what it is – the Native Americans, the Africans, the Acadians and the others who joined them – had been afraid to get wet in order to get fed, there would be no crawfish étouffée, no catfish courtbouillon, no shrimp creole, no gumbo.

Folks along the bayou, along the river, along the coast have always been right fond of mixing things up a little, and that's how we came to have Cajun polkas and Creole *baisse-bas* and all the other great music and culture that we enjoy in this mixed up place built on mixed up land. That's what our crossroads are all about. Mix it up, baby, mix it up.

John Laudun is a writer and folklorist living in Lafayette, where he is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. For more information on the topics in this essay, visit johnlaudun.com.